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Who really invented the Detroit Hummer?

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Bartender Rick Paulger, center, talks to Nick Chapman, left, and Ben Burch, both of Detroit, at the Buhl Bar in downtown Detroit last Friday. JUNFU HAN/DETROIT FREE PRESS

The dessert-like Hummer cocktail — a luscious mix of rum, Kahlua and vanilla ice cream — was born roughly 50 years ago in Detroit. But conflicting stories explain its origin.

Two legendary bartenders — one who worked for 50 years at the Bayview Yacht Club, another whose decades of service included Caucus Club, London Chop House and the Rattlesnake Club — both died this year. At times, one or the other got credit for inventing the blended beverage known across metro Detroit and beyond. But never both.

The artisanal craft-cocktail trend has drawn attention to Detroit classics such as the Last Word (gin, green Chartreuse, Maraschino cherry, lime), invented a century ago at Detroit Athletic Club, and the recent Skeleton Key (bourbon, elder-flower liqueur, lemon juice, ginger beer, Angostura bitters) from Michael Symon's Roast. While a well-stocked bar can make either of these beverages, the Hummer isn't as readily crafted.

"Ice cream is a really huge pain in the ass to work with as a bartender," said Dave Kwiatkowski, a partner in Detroit Optimist Society, which owns several Detroit bars and restaurants — none of which has the Hummer on its menu. "You've got to have a freezer right next to you, basically."

Much of the Hummer's legacy is online, in countless online recipes with small variations, from the Absolut website (no, they don't add vodka) to What's Cooking America. At the Bayview Yacht Club, bartender Anthony (Tony) Reed said he's received calls from bartenders across the world seeking instructions fill their customers' Hummer requests.

In Germany, he said the Hummer has been elevated to knighthood: "They call it 'Sir Jerome.' "

Jerome Adams, who died in April, is credited by the Free Press with inventing the drink in 1968: "The story goes that Ed Jacoby, owner of Jacoby's restaurant downtown, came into the yacht club after a Red Wings game and discovered Adams' creation. After an initial tasting, Jacoby and friends tasted several more. Thus the Hummer was born. The drink was named because, someone said, 'after a couple of them, they make you start to hum.' "

However, on June 16, 1982, the Free Press reported: "The Hummer was invented at the London Chop House approximately 12 years ago by day bartender Farouk Elhaje, in collaboration with Chop House owner Lester Gruber. In the course of their experimentation, they concocted seven or eight other ice cream drinks, recalls Elhaje, but none has achieved the fame of the Hummer."

Elhaje appears to be the earliest mention in the Free Press archives, but more articles have attributed the drink to Adams. Eater Detroit has also given credit for the Hummer to both Elhaje and Adams — but again, both men are never mentioned in the same article.

Richard (Rick) Nemeth, 68, a retired career bartender who worked with Elhaje at the Rattlesnake Club in the 1990s, said both men had a hand in what is today known as the Hummer.

"From what Farouk explained to me, Jerome invented the Hummer. But Farouk was the first one to put ice cream in it," Nemeth said, adding that previously, it had been made with half-and-half or cream with ice, and emulsified like a milkshake.

Reed, 66, a Bayview Yacht Club bartender since 1973, said Adams invented it — and had always included ice cream. But also, crushed ice. "Nobody put ice in it but us," he said. "That's why ours is different from everybody else."

'A sage quality'

Adams, who died at 77 in April, and Elhaje, who died at 80 in March, are both distinguished for a creative, classy generation of Detroit bartenders who made the craft their career for life. Their presence created an atmosphere of warmth. And their style is influencing a new class of Detroit barkeeps.

"The great bartenders were like the glue — they were the attractor," Nemeth said. "And it wasn't something flashy. We didn't flip bottles. You poured a good drink, you gave a little conversation. You made people feel comfortable, and that was the art — making a stranger feel at home."

He recalls burning up blenders making Hummers over the years.

"Farouk was a rush," Nemeth said. "I learned so much from him. ... He was humble, but by the same token — he was always very generous in a lot of ways, but then he held back — he wouldn't tell you everything. He was like, 'This is my territory.' "

He said they worked together to "make a good product in a comfortable atmosphere for the people, where they could come and just relax and enjoy themselves."

Elhaje was inducted into Bartender Magazine's Bartender Hall of Fame in 1985, and Adams in 2017. The publication describes bartenders to be "as much a cheerful philosopher of life itself as well as a key ingredient to any successful establishment's ambiance."

Bayview Yacht Club bartender and assistant manager Jerome Adams is seen pouring a Hummer in this photo from 2001. GABRIEL B. TAIT/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Farouk Elhaje pours a Hummer in this 1982 photo. FREE PRESS ARCHIVES/NEWSPAPERS.COM

Carl Gerych, 74, tended bar for 52 years — mostly at The Lark, a now-closed upscale restaurant in West Bloomfield. His career included waiting on Elvis Presley in Las Vegas, and celebrities from NBA star Chauncey Billups to actor Jack Nicholson at the Lark.

Gerych said he noticed over the years a trend of younger bartenders who "don't have the personality to make money" and spend less time getting to know their customers.

"There's no conversation anymore unless you start it," he said. "Then they give you the briefest answer, and then they walk away."

The Detroit Optimist Society owns several bars and restaurants that opened in recent years — such as The Sugar House, Bad Luck Bar, Wright & Company and The Peterboro. Kwiatkowski said bartenders such as Adams and Elhaje delivered "outstanding levels of service."

"They were like this old guard of a type of person who believe that bartending could be a career and was a craft," he said. "All over the world, that idea kind of died. Bartending became this thing that you did while you were trying to get a different job."

The Buhl Bar, a classic downtown Detroit bar, reopened in 2002, and Detroit Optimist Society took it over last year. Rick Paulger, 43, is head bartender there. He said Adams' reputation is "legendary," and he aims to create a similar experience for his clientele.

"There's sort of a sage quality to those guys," he said.

They didn't care about "milk-washed Campari" or what region the Vermouth comes from, he said. The Buhl Bar menu is heavy on the classics: The Old Fashioned, Whiskey Sour, Manhattan, Martini, etcetera.

"We just try to keep it classy in an old-school, professional way," Paulger said.

Paulger said the craft cocktail movement has inspired a more refined approach.

"All the sudden in the late 2000s, a bunch of people got it in their heads: 'Let's see if we can take this back to being more of a craft and less just throwing a product at people,' " Paulger said. "Once you have craft involved, you have these bartenders that are really slowing down and making your drink well: Knowing the ingredients and how to use them."

As for the Hummer's history, Paulger said he'd always heard that Adams created it.

"It's sort of like, 'Who invented the knock-knock joke?' " he said. "Anytime something goes big-time, a lot of people want to claim it. ... You pour booze on that equation, and it doesn't really help."

A bartender memorialized

Plans are underway for an event June 7 honoring Adams, who was "like a father" to people at the yacht club, Reed said. About 500-700 people are expected to attend.

"They're going to memorialize him," he said of the bartender, who died a few months after marking his 50th anniversary with the yacht club. "There's gonna be a lot of pitchers of Hummers. They might just have one station making nothing but Hummers — that would be my idea."

The following quote was posted on the Bayview Yacht Club's Facebook page, with attribution to Vice Commodore Greg Thomas. It also was published with Adams' Bartender Hall of Fame induction:

"When you watch Jerome work, you can tell that he likes the people, and you can tell that they like him. He protects the children. He spoils the women. He respects everyone. He takes care of those who need care. He gives his pals a rough go. He shows newcomers his unfailing hospitality. He treats the place not as if it were his place of employment, but as if it were his home. And it is."

Spirits of Detroit columnist Robert Allen covers craft alcohol for the Free Press. Contact him: rallen@freepress.com or on Untappd, ra-Detroit and Twitter, @rallenMI.

How to make a Hummer

By the glass, from Farouk Elhaje:

- ½ ounces of Kahlua
- ½ ounce white Bacardi rum
- 1 scoop of vanilla ice cream

Blend all ingredients and serve in a cocktail glass.

By the pitcher, from Jerome Adams:

- ½ cup white rum, preferably Bacardi
- ½ cup Kahlua
- 1½ cups vanilla ice cream
- 1 cup crushed ice

Pour the rum and Kahlua into an electric blender. Add the ice cream and the ice. Blend until all ingredients have combined and adhere to the inside of the blender, leaving a funnel in the center.

Pour and scrape into four large brandy glasses and serve at once. Makes four servings.

Source: Detroit Free Press archives

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